

## **FIRE FIRE DESIRE – The new feature film by Steff Gruber**

*Chris Jarvis interviews Steff Gruber – Phnom Penh, Cambodia, December 12, 2013.*

**CJ: Steff Gruber: Your new film, *Fire Fire Desire*, opens with a quote from Swiss author Martin Suter.**

SG: The quote comes from an interview with Suter in 2012 in the Swiss newspaper "NZZ am Sonntag." Suter says, "It's a subversive act not to resign oneself to getting older but to do something to get back to a better time." There could be no better way to sum up my motivation for making this film. My male protagonists in the film and I personally are fighting against aging. On all levels: mentally, emotionally and physically. For example, my main character, Geoffrey Giuliano, has cosmetic surgery....

**CJ: You talk about your male protagonists. Is *Fire Fire Desire* a male film?**

SG: I wouldn't say that. The female protagonists have a lot to say. Especially the nymphomaniac Jessica.

**CJ: We haven't heard from you in almost 20 years. Why does it always take so long for you to present a new film?**

SG: There are several answers to this question. First of all, filmmaking is not my bread-and-butter job, but my passion. I only have a few hours a day to work on my films. Nevertheless, it's not a hobby. I have my own production company, KINO.NET AG. We have highly professional editing suites and a sound studio. The main reason why there are always a few years between my films is the particular way I work, and not just lack of time. I should also mention that I made two feature-length films in the 20 years you mentioned, but they didn't become very well known. *Secret Moments* was broadcast late at night on Schweizer Fernsehen, and I never released *Passion Despair*....

**CJ: Most of your films are so-called docudramas....**

SG: Yes, that's what we called our particular style in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, I call my way of filmmaking "personal films". This name also says something about my approach and, in particular, my reasons for making a film. The term docudrama refers more to the technical side, in other words the mixed form of documentary and feature film. But I'm not really interested in whether the material in a film is documentary or enacted. What counts for me is the final product. It's very important to me that a film comes close to reality, or to what I perceive as true. I'm interested in truth, not ideologies.

**CJ: Can you tell us more about what you mean by the term "personal film"?**

SG: I didn't invent the term as a gimmick. I'm asked all the time what kind of films I make. Documentaries or feature films? Even on questionnaires, for example for film festivals, you have to choose between these two genres. But that's not possible with my films. And you usually can't tick both genres. With my invented subgenre, the "personal film", I leave this question unanswered and can then address my concern directly. This is most important. I don't engage in heuristics in the sense of "what should I make a film about next?" Nor am I given topics by broadcasting companies or producers. I *have to* make my next film; I dream about it or have sleepless nights. I am haunted by real demons. The subjects that preoccupy me are all already there, dormant in my head. When they awaken, I can barely stand it. I start researching. In the past, I used libraries and scientific institutes, today I mainly use the Internet and literature. I'm not in the least bit interested in whether the subject is topical or promises commercial success. All that matters is that I am *personally* interested in it, and obsessed by it. My "personal films" are a hybrid of documentary and feature films, classic docudramas as defined by Wim Wenders in the 1980s. Today, however, the docudrama genre is understood to mean something different. They're not essay films either...they're just *personal films*!

**CJ: You mentioned that you never showed your last film *Passion Despair*. Why not?**

SG: ... that's right. It should never have been made. All my colleagues advised me not to make it.

**CJ: *Passion Despair* is a portrait of a pedophile photographer...**

SG: Yes. I had to make the film. I had to take the risk that the film would be a flop.

**CJ: Why?**

SG: I just didn't want to believe that the world today is so undifferentiated. As a member of the '68 generation, I'm someone who asks questions first and doesn't know the answers in advance. This was the case with *Passion Despair*. I met pedophiles who have never committed a crime in their lives and very likely never will. The film portrays such a person. But even mentioning this violates today's omnipresent "political correctness". A television editor asked me if my protagonist would be arrested at the end of the film. I was horrified and speechless. The distributors didn't even want to watch the film because they – quote – "couldn't look me in the eye afterwards". Just imagine! I come from a time when you only ever formed an opinion after you had preoccupied yourself with a matter, or in my case, after having seen the film. That's not so with the subject of pedophilia. People have an opinion immediately. The whole world has the same opinion. You can discuss murder, for example, but not erotic fantasies....

**CJ: You are really talking yourself into a rage...**

SG: Yes – even though I have long since come to terms with how most people function. The reason is that I just don't want to believe that people today are no longer curious. Open to things that are different, incomprehensible....

**CJ: Going back to your *personal films*, was *Passion Despair* also a personal issue?**

SG: You mean the subject of pedophilia? No, it isn't. I'm not into children, if that's what you mean. I was interested more in examining a social taboo. I should also say that *Passion Despair* is a pure documentary, so it's not the hybrid film form I usually prefer....

**CJ: Your film about Werner Herzog and Klaus Kinski is also a documentary.**

SG: Yes, *Location Africa* is also a pure documentary that was made for ARD. However, the motivation to make this film was also a very personal one. For me, Werner Herzog was – like Wim Wenders, by the way – a "personal filmmaker", someone who is driven and has to tell his stories.

**CJ: Your new film *Fire Fire Desire* will be shown at cinemas soon. Could you tell us something about your approach to filmmaking based on this film?**

SG: *Fire Fire Desire* is a classic personal film. Like *Moon in Taurus* (1978), *Fetish & Dreams* (1985) and *Secret Moments* (2005) before it. The process that led to this film began over ten years ago when a videotape was leaked to me from the US. It was a travel guide for sex tourists. It openly gave advice on how and where to get women in Southeast Asia for as little money as possible. I was horrified. Not because I had anything against sex tourism in principle – I didn't have an opinion about that at that time – but because the film lacked any emotion. It is exclusively about business. Sex for money, or as Michel Houellebecq depicts it in his novel *Platform*: a bartering arrangement from which all parties profit. But my innate dislike of the sex travel video stemmed mainly from the fact that I'm an incorrigible romantic, and the video lacked any form of romance....

**CJ: That videotape is now cited in your new film as "found footage" ....**

SG: The video alone would not have been enough for me as a film subject. Still, I felt there was something there that fascinated me, something I had to get to the bottom of. I wanted to find out who had made the video.

**CJ: In the film, your quest is shown to be triggered by your search for your Thai ex-girlfriend....**

SG: The evolutionary history of my film story was different. The search for the girl is a storyline that I only developed later. The film as it exists today is a long development process

and it consists of different storylines. I didn't always follow these in the chronology of the film as it is today. So I started looking for the maker of the sex tourism video. I thought this would be easy. I found the address of the distribution company in New York. But the company had gone bankrupt and I couldn't find anyone who knew anything about the filmmaker. It wasn't until 2009 that I got another lead and traveled to Cambodia for the first time.

**CJ: Why Cambodia?**

SG: On an internet forum for sex tourists, someone had responded to an ad I posted. He told me he believed the maker of the sex tourism video was now living in Southeast Asia.

**CJ: So you didn't have a script at that time?**

SG: No, that's right. But I pretended I had one. I put together a crew, bought a camera, etc. Just a few hours after I arrived in Asia, we had a "production meeting". People wanted to see a script and know what was going on....

**CJ: How did you get out of that one?**

SG: I'd already starting getting anxious on the plane. I reread Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* during the flight. The story had always fascinated me and for a long time I had planned to use Conrad's structure one day for a story of my own. This is why I had watched Werner Herzog's *Aguirre. The Wrath of God* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* while still in Switzerland. Both films are known to have been inspired by Conrad's novel. On my laptop, I sketched out a storyline during the flight. Like the character Marlow in Conrad's novel, I would travel up a river, not the Congo, as in *Heart of Darkness*, but the Mekong. In search of the maker of the sex tourism video.

**CJ: You wanted to talk about your first production session....**

SG: I used the text I wrote on the plane as a script. We started with a bar in the red-light district of Victory Hill in Sihanoukville, Cambodia.

**CJ: What made you go to that bar?**

SG: The blog writer who had responded to one of my ads lived in Sihanoukville, and he had contacted me from that bar. But it was a complete fluke that we found some leads in the first bar. Oscar, the Canadian bar owner, remembered the film producer. That's how I heard his name for the first time. He called himself Roman Guy.

**CJ: Sounds like a pseudonym.**

SG: I didn't know that at the time, but it was. He had derived the name from "the roaming guy". He obviously saw himself at that time as a roaming, searching guy. We also learned

from Oscar that Roman Guy had a girlfriend who helped him with his videos. The idea came up that I could portray my ex-girlfriend Malee in the film as a mutual friend. You should know that I lived in Southeast Asia for the first time in 1987 as a young man. I fell in love with a young Thai woman called Malee and we had a relationship that ended when I returned to Switzerland. Once we had this idea for the plot, the whole story suddenly came together and we had a compelling dramaturgy: I would search for our mutual ex-girlfriend Malee through Roman Guy.

**CJ: Did you also find out anything about your ex-girlfriend Malee?**

SG: No, we didn't start looking for her until a year later.

**CJ: So *Fire Fire Desire* is about the search for Roman Guy?**

SG: Yes, it is. And this is where Joseph Conrad's story comes in. In 1899, when Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness*, there were still a lot of so-called white spaces on the world map – areas where no white man had ever set foot. So Marlow's journey was not just a metaphor, but a real journey into the unknown. It's hard to imagine this in the age of Google Earth; every square centimeter has been explored, recorded, photographed.

Conrad's story is about the search for Colonel Kurtz, who has inexplicably vanished. Marlow is sent to look for Kurtz. He is commissioned by people with financial interests, but Marlow, the "hunter", soon has other reasons. In my film, an expat puts it this way, "He knows something I don't know, so you have to find him, to find out what it is". *Apocalypse Now* is ultimately about the same thing; we suspect or hope to find someone who knows more than we do, the white spaces on the map are a metaphor. Like in the film *Stalker* by Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky. In his film, he calls it "the zone" that you're not allowed to enter.

**CJ: The tree of knowledge.**

SG: The image from the Bible has always fascinated me. Also, that it is forbidden to eat from the fruit of this tree. And, how could it be otherwise? The tree stands in the middle of paradise. Theologians come up with different interpretations: the sexual, the ethical, the intellectual, the developmental-psychological and the emancipatory interpretation. If you watch my films, you know which interpretation I'm most interested in....

**CJ: ... the sexual...**

SG: Right. Because I think that actually people's problems are usually to do with that, and especially with all the different expectations and perspectives that are related to it. Going back to my new film: I want to find out something that I don't yet know. I want to see something I have never seen before. To stay with the biblical image: I want to find in paradise the man who ate the forbidden fruit. In my film, his name is Roman Guy. This is when our film work really got going. We researched tirelessly, and of course the camera was always running.

**CJ: You could say that you wrote your screenplay with the camera rolling....**

SG: Yes. Reality is my prompter. It's just that reality is a very complex construct and the prompter sometimes gets it wrong, misses a line or even lies. Reality also has a different dramaturgy than we need in our film narrative. This is when my work starts. I focus on a certain direction, sort, select, and if necessary, manipulate. It's an exciting creative process that I want the audience to participate in some of the time.

**CJ: You're making a film of your life? Is it an autobiography?**

SG: If it comes across that way to the viewer, I've achieved my goal.

**CJ: Isn't that how it works?**

SG: No, and ten times no. The story of the film is fiction. All created by me! My life is not so interesting and important that it had to be filmed! Unlike my subject matter. The production process, i.e., shooting technique and editing, are documentary. By this I mean the aesthetics of the film. I can explain this in more detail. In the beginning there is a topic that won't let me go. In this case the trigger was the sex tourism video from the 1990s that was sent to me. This video is real and is also partly quoted in my film. Also, as a young man I had a Thai girlfriend who I had lost track of and whose whereabouts I did not know. There is also the maker of the sex tourism video. All the Western expats appearing in the film and the Asian women, their biographies, life situations and views are also real. My job was to bring all of this together and condense it into a film story.

The subjects we wanted to investigate and document were the search for Roman Guy, the maker of the sex tourism video from the 1990s, and the search for Malee, my ex-girlfriend from 1987. To do this we wanted to find and portray expats, i.e., Western men who emigrated to Southeast Asia and may have known Roman Guy or Malee. There was also an interest in Asian women who are attracted to Western men or meet them for other reasons. We wanted to explore the interdependent relationship between the expats and Asian women with their different needs and cultures, and the problems that arise as a result. Many of these elements originally had nothing to do with each other. There were also hidden sub-themes I couldn't have known about at the beginning. These motifs came to me through our protagonists during filming. They're extremely important elements of the film. One expat sells me video footage that someone secretly filmed in the brothels of Cambodia in the 1990s. Or there was the Vietnamese girlfriend of an American expat who gave me a sketch of women jumping over a fire. The woman can barely read or write, but she draws beautiful pictures. The ritual of prostitutes jumping over fire in Cambodia during the UNTAC period became a central element, or even a leitmotif, of my film.

**CJ: *Fire Fire Desire...***

SG: Exactly. I am indirectly indebted to the artist for the title. The women say these words as they jump around a fire holding hands. It's like Rumpelstiltskin: *Nobody knows, but nobody*

knows... The implications of the ritual are powerful. You can read a lot about it in *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer, for example. This metaphor is central to my film. But going back to the start of filming: I needed a film story, or at least the summary of a story, something I could tell my collaborators about in concise words to make the task clear. At the time, I had come up with the following film story: like the Conrad character Marlow, I follow the river far into northern Cambodia. I'm looking for Roman Guy in the hope that through him I can find my ex-girlfriend and his ex-girlfriend Malee. This is fiction. During preparation work, however, I assumed that there are thousands, if not tens of thousands, of Malees, or 40-something Asian women who have been abandoned by Western men. I then met expats, Western men who were also there when Roman Guy had lived in Southeast Asia, according to my personal story. One of the first people I interviewed remembered him. From there, it was easy finding other expats who knew Roman Guy. They all described him according to their own personal memories and they revealed some different, sometimes contradictory aspects about Guy.

**CJ: Did you find the real Roman Guy?**

SG: Yes, we found him. But when I finally came face to face with him, I quickly realized that he was not "my Roman Guy". During the process, our fictional character had evolved in a completely different way. There was no way we could cast him in the "original" role.

**CJ: Did you continue to search for the real Malee?**

SG: Yeah, sure.

**CJ: And? Did you find her?**

SG: We did. I never expected this to happen though. Without an address or more specific information, I thought this would be an impossible task. She could also be dead or living elsewhere in the world and under a different name.

**CJ: How did you find her?**

SG: I would have to elaborate... I thought I remembered the name of the village where Malee grew up. The village is near Surin. I sent someone there with a photograph of 16-year-old Malee. The person went to that village and showed the picture to local people. An aunt recognized Malee. She called her in Bangkok, where she was visiting her daughter, and told her about the strange incident. Malee subsequently called the number of our production company in Bangkok, which we had given to people in the village... In Southeast Asia, it is extremely important that people save face. Even if everyone knows that something or other goes against social norms, everyone plays along. In the case of the real Malee, this was exactly the problem. Today, she lives on a farm outside Surin and has two daughters who are studying in Bangkok. In my film, she would have had to talk about her past. And the whole world would have known she had worked as a bar girl in the notorious Soy Cowboy after we

met in the Suzy Wong bar, including her husband and children. They know that even without her "coming out" in my film, but they don't talk about it.

**CJ: How did she react to the reunion and your offer?**

SG: She was pleased to see me again. She made the long bus trip from Surin to Bangkok to meet me. It was a special experience for me to see the now mature Malee. There was nothing girlish about her any more, of course....

**CJ: ... and the magic?**

SG: The magic was gone too. We probably both felt that. She rejected my offer of appearing in the film. For the reasons I've already explained. But we had a long conversation, which we recorded and transcribed. It served as the basis for the Malee dialogue.

**CJ: Who plays the main female character, Malee?**

SG: We had to look for Malee. We were actually looking for three Malees. A young 17-year-old, a 40-year-old, and my real girlfriend from back then. For the young and the current Malee, we organized several castings in Bangkok over a period of four years and met a total of over 100 women. We were often close to despair and even thought of giving up. For the young Malee I had a very clear idea. Only her appearance was important; she had to have a strong screen presence. Everyone who would see the film should fall in love with her. This was the only way people could understand why I wanted to meet her again after all these years. So when our casting agent Noi Pasiri brought in the girl Natacha Oracha – no that's not a stage name – I knew immediately that this was her. But as I said, that took years. For the older Malee, we had different criteria. Apart from English skills, her biography was important to us. It was imperative that it matched the real Malee's biography. I wasn't personally present at all the castings, and after a particularly frustrating week of casting in Bangkok, my producer called me in Switzerland and complained about his difficulties. I advised him to forget about it for that day and go and have a beer. Which he subsequently did, in a street bar near Nana station. There he bumped into the owner of the bar, Jasmin Rueangchan. He thought she could be considered for the role and invited her to the audition. Jasmin was used to being chatted up by foreigners every day and just laughed at the offer. It took considerable persuasion to get her to come to the studio the next day. Straight after the casting, my producer sent me the files of the screen test and I called back immediately. We had found her. Jasmine's name is "Malee" in Thai. That was a good omen... Their two biographies also had similarities.

**CJ: How and why did you choose the American actor Geoffrey Giuliano?**

SG: We wanted someone who has lived in Southeast Asia for a long time, a real expat and not an actor from Hollywood. Geoffrey found out about our project on the Internet and wrote, "I am Roman Guy". We then heard he was impossible to work with. There are warnings about

him on the Internet. We sent him the script and his 15-minute monologue and my producer visited him the next day in Pattaya, where he lives. He gave a convincing performance in the very first test. We threw all caution to the wind and hired him. Then we took him to the Cambodian jungle and put him in "his" brothel. It was hell!

**CJ: You already had experience with Klaus Kinski...**

SG: Kinski was a Sunday school pupil compared to Giuliano. He wanted to murder me, for example! He threw me five meters across the hotel room onto my bed and then attacked me! He yelled so loudly that the hotel's security staff rushed into the room and had to free me from his clutches. I had to put up with all of that. On set though, against all expectations, everything was professional. As soon as the camera started rolling, he was like another person. You soon realized he has the stature of the really great character actors, like Kinski, Brando or Nicholson. The psychograph was right: he is Roman Guy. Giuliano is a genius. No doubt about it. He hadn't promised too much. The role was made for him. He didn't have to pretend.

**CJ: Would you work with him again, in a new project?**

SG: I've asked myself the same question. My producer says no. He wouldn't want to work for me again if Giuliano was involved. I'm lost without my producer, so the decision is clear. On the other hand, I have to admit that I sometimes see Giuliano's peculiarities in myself. Normal people can't do this kind of thing at all. Making this kind of film requires a certain degree of mania and craziness. In a way, Giuliano and I are soul mates: me in a Zwingli way, coming from Zürich's educated middle-class, him in a Sicilian way... If I'd had Sicilian ancestors and grown up in the slums of New York, I might have developed in a similar way. He writes every day that he wants to make a new film with me. I am convinced that together we could rise to unimagined heights. The only thing is: am I mentally and physically able to do that?

**CJ: Many other expats who are not professional actors appear in your film. What is their role?**

SG: The expats have two functions. First, many of them knew the real Roman Guy and they help me search for him. Second, they represent what I might have become if I'd chosen to live with Malee back then and had stayed in Southeast Asia. Most of the men portrayed are my age or a little older. For the first time, I consciously participate in the conversations of older men. By "consciously", I mean I watch them through a telephoto lens, and listen to them with amplified microphones. This becomes a whole new, exciting experience for me. In the evening after the interviews, I always look in the mirror and see myself in a completely new way. I ask myself questions like: What makes me different from these men?

**CJ: What makes you different?**

SG: The film, or the fact that I had to deal with older men, definitely triggered something in me, started a kind of psychoanalytical process. What differentiates me – I don't mean this in a

judgmental way, but merely factually – is that I'm constantly confronted with new things and I'm interested in them. Indeed, I have to be interested in them. Many of our expats have finished with their former lives. They're only interested in their primary needs, in the here and now. Despite these differences, however, we have something in common, and I realized this for the first time while making the film: we only have 10 to 15 years to live! Imagine that for a moment. That's a damn short time if you consider that it takes me over five years to make a film! "The horror! The horror!" are Colonel Kurtz's last words in *Heart of Darkness*. That's why I have to preoccupy myself with young people every so often, so that I don't keep thinking about it...

**CJ: The street vendor Kia, is 14 years old when you first interviewed her for the film. Is Kia a kind of opposite pole to the expats?**

SG: I first met Kia in 2009 when we started the film. In Phnom Penh's old town, in the so-called Lake Side District, which unfortunately no longer exists, the then 14-year-old approached me with a vendor's tray around her neck. She asked, "Do you wanna buy a book, sir?" I bought a couple of books from her. She had books about the Pol Pot regime that I didn't know about. We ran into her on the streets of Phnom Penh almost every day. One day I asked her if we could film her home. I asked her to ask her mother. My producer wanted to know what Kia's life had to do with our film. I didn't have a plausible answer. I also didn't know at the time that my cinematic quest would span the next five years. Or that Kia would become so important to the film. We then portrayed her tough life on the streets of Phnom Penh for the first time. In the years that followed, we met Kia again and again and filmed her as she grew from a young girl into a woman. I probably expected her to take the "normal" path and end up in a brothel like many of the women we portrayed. I was wrong and that makes me very happy. Things are rarely as they seem to be... Today I can answer the question my producer asked me back then. The apparently unimportant incidents that accompanied our film work gradually gained significance; without them the film would be lacking substance. We would only have the skeleton of what is actually a very linear story. There are other storylines besides Kia that have nothing to do with the main plot (the search for Roman Guy and Malee). In each case, I explain this as follows: The dramaturgical structure of my film is like a tree. A fir tree. The roots are the idea, the trunk is the actual story, and the branches are these "subplots". It is interesting that in the course of our work a few of these branches touched each other in the wind. Subplots triggered each other. For example, protagonists met and their lives developed differently because of the film work. And indeed a tree is not a tree without branches.

**CJ: How has your relationship with Southeast Asia evolved and what are the biggest changes that have occurred in the 25 years since you were last here?**

SG: In 1987, Marguerite Duras brought me to Southeast Asia; her literature, *L'Amant*, the story of her youth in what was then Indochina. And also Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. Back in the 1980s, people were still visually and culturally very close to the stories of these authors. The colonial era was still omnipresent. With a little imagination, it came alive

at night after a rainfall in Phnom Penh, when the streets were wet and a solitary rickshaw driver pedaled through the city in the sparse light. With the colonial architecture as a backdrop, the sounds, such as that melancholy bamboo xylophone music that the wind blows across the Mekong river from far away, and of course the smells, jasmine, foreign spices... That was Southeast Asia. There were still some opium dens around in those days, much like in Graham Green. And the girls were different too... But just like one of my protagonists says, "When you notice these differences, you know that you're old now". The changes in Phnom Penh now are striking. Every time we returned to the city, we couldn't believe our eyes; skyscrapers have shot up everywhere, whole lakes have been removed...

**CJ: You're talking about Boeung Kak Lake in Phnom Penh....**

SG: Exactly. In 2009, we filmed Kia, who at that time was living with her family in a traditional stilt house far out on the lake. Two years later, I saw her mother among a crowd of displaced people in Barbara Lüthy's *10vor10* report [news program on Schweizer Fernsehen, editor's note]. The changes that have taken place so rapidly in Southeast Asia are very visible; the changes in society are palpable.

**CJ: How do the social changes manifest themselves?**

SG: We shot our film mainly in Cambodia and Thailand, and the cultures of these countries are probably even more different than the cultures of Sweden and Sicily. Visually, Thailand is a first-world country. Bangkok today is a high-tech city. When I first visited in 1987, there were 1.5 million people living there. Today, the population is about 20 million. Urbanization started much earlier in Thailand than in Cambodia. The reasons are historical. In Cambodia, nearly two million people were killed in a genocide that began in 1975 and continued into the 1990s. Anyone who had a job, could read and write, or who wore glasses, was first tortured and then murdered. Only the uneducated peasants survived. When UNTAC, which had controlled the country since 1991, withdrew in 1993, it left behind not only a completely land-mined and destroyed country, but also a destroyed culture. It will take many more generations to repair this damage.

Phnom Penh is a small town compared to Bangkok. As I mentioned before, construction work is going on everywhere and the poor population is being driven out of the city. Thank God there are people in Cambodia like "our" pediatrician Beat Richner, who runs two big state-of-the-art children's hospitals, and Nico Mesterharm with his organization Meta House. Nico is trying to promote a new understanding of art, music and culture among the local population with exhibitions, workshops, etc. The French are also involved in this area with their Institut Français and, of course, there's François Ponchaud, who is supporting the Cambodian rural population in their fight against land grabbing as a result of concessions granted to foreign companies.

**CJ: There are countless Western NGOs...**

SG: Yes, unfortunately...

**CJ: You don't speak favorably of the NGOs in Cambodia....**

SG: Our film work gave us an insight into local procedures and occurrences that a normal tourist might not see. My opinion on this issue is quite radical: NGOs should be banned and new organizations should be established by the international community instead, or existing NGOs should be put under the direction of the UN or some other controlling body. This harsh criticism is not directed at Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Médecins Sans Frontières, etc. I'm talking about organizations like Save the Children, World Vision and hundreds of similar smaller bodies that do more harm than good. I'm talking about organizations that have two main goals: first, to line their own pockets with as much money as possible, and second, to impose the most conservative, Christian fundamentalist worldview possible on the local population. On the first point, all these organizations clearly depend on donations from the first world, and this is a highly competitive market. But to lie to donors, for example, by making them believe that Cambodia is teeming with child prostitutes and Western punters, is simply fraud and does enormous damage to the country's image. That used to be the case, but never to the extent portrayed by the media. There were few exceptions. This problem could have been solved at the time with the appropriate diplomatic skills of the donor states. Today, there are hardly any prostitutes. Definitely fewer than in Zurich, for example. This is thanks to the NGOs. Around the world, this is seen as a success. And the NGOs boast about it...

**CJ: Isn't it a success if Asian women no longer have to sell themselves?**

SG: It would definitely be a success if the lost income had been replaced by other ways of earning money. But, that is not the case. There are no jobs, no alternatives. In a restaurant, service staff earn \$60 per month, more than half of which is usually spent on food and transport. In the garment factories, the earnings are even worse. And workers are never allowed to be absent, or sick. Otherwise, they lose their job on the spot. Many of these women have children who may also fall ill, so the mothers have to take time off. The conditions are catastrophic. The NGOs are complicit in a new plight, one much worse than prostitution: child trafficking. Many women are forced into pregnancy, and the babies are then taken from them and sold. Many are not forced, they do it voluntarily. They have to get money to feed their families.

**CJ: You seem to be a very political person. Why don't you make a film about the social changes after the Khmer Rouge or about NGOs?**

SG: Because I couldn't. I can and want to make films only about things that concern me personally. Of course, every now and then I try to explain historical, political and cultural-historical contexts in my films. In *Passion Despair*, for example, there is a digression into the cultural history of the veneration of girls in literature, art, etc., and one about the splinter state of Transnistria. In *Fire Fire Desire*, there are references to the Khmer Rouge.

**CJ: Were you supported by Thailand and Cambodia in your film work? Did the authorities even know about your presence?**

SG: In Thailand, where we worked with a local film production company, they took care of the filming permits. This didn't always work though, for example with the state railway company or at the airport in Hua Hin. I went there in person and we got permits without any problems. Thailand is world-famous for film production services. And they have everything – equipment, studios and highly trained film technicians, location scouts, casting directors, etc. The only problem is that it's not cheap there anymore. It's probably almost as expensive as in Switzerland. On the other hand, it's possible to work there very professionally, which I sometimes enjoy. In the scene where several girls jump over a fire, which we shot in the countryside near Hua Hin, we had over 30 people on the team, including five pyrotechnicians. Of course, I'd like to work like that all the time. But in Cambodia, that wasn't possible....

**CJ: Why not?**

SG: In Cambodia, there are no official filming permits. That's not entirely true, of course. If you have a lot of money and time and a script translated into Khmer, then it's possible. One government agency offered to organize a permit for US\$ 50,000. Obviously, that would only be possible with a "harmless" script. Prostitution, politics, sex tourism, an absolute no-go! So we didn't even bother...

**CJ: How were you able to shoot in Cambodia then?**

SG: I asked myself: How can you work when you have to be invisible? And how does that affect the cinematic work? The first question is quickly answered. You pretend to be a tourist and just film with a small amateur video camera. That's what we did. The whole film is shot with a Canon mini handycam. If necessary, I could make the camera disappear in seconds. As for the second question – how the clandestine approach would affect the film – I still can't really answer that. It's certainly good not to attract attention when you're depicting reality. Also, you are taken less seriously if you only have a small camera. The film definitely benefited from that. However, after five years of working without any problems, I became cocky, and when we were shooting the Roman Guy scene in the Cambodian jungle, we were arrested.

**CJ: That was the shoot with Geoffrey Giuliano?**

SG: That made it worse, yes. Not only was I dealing with a very dangerous police chief and his 10 men, but also an insane actor. There was a risk that he would go after the police officers.

**CJ: Can you give us a more detailed account of the incident?**

SG: We had spent weeks setting up a brothel in the jungle. An incredibly romantic balcony over a river. In the absence of proper film lighting, we lit the entire scene with cheap Chinese construction lamps. It looked impressive. You couldn't have presented the scene in a more conspicuous way. Everything was ready. Only the girls who were to play Roman Guy's harem were missing. They had gathered at a meeting point in the city, where my producer picked them up in the evening in our bus. The police watched as a dozen young girls got into the vehicle with Western-looking men. All they had to do was follow the bus. The policemen surrounded our brothel site, and then pounced. Like in a detective story. A cameraman from the local television station was also there. They were convinced they'd made a big catch. We all had to line up and were then interrogated one by one. The whole night. There was no more filming.

**CJ: How do you feel when there is suddenly the danger that you may not be able to finish something you have worked on for years?**

SG: In a moment of danger, there is no room for feelings like that. My experience as a pilot probably helps me here. I've been flying for over 30 years. In the moment of danger, emotions are switched off completely. You become a machine and you know very clearly, you have to do this, then that, otherwise it's over. I knew that the police would accuse us of something, however fantastical, and that they would get away with it. We didn't stand a chance. They immediately started accusing us of making porn movies with the girls. Two of the girls were also underage. My God, how stupid can you be! As we know today, my instinctive reaction was the right one. I confronted the boss and told him about my film. With our translator. Explaining all the intellectual implications, my artistic intentions, and so on and so forth. I remember that I even used the word "metalevel". Giuliano probably just rolled his eyes. I don't remember him any more... In any case, the policeman must have felt scared or something. Or it was all too much for him after a few hours. He probably also wanted to go home to his family. In any case, they suddenly let us go. But not without demanding "gas money". They argued that they had wasted a lot of gas because of us and said they had no money to refuel. Then they told us to show up at the police headquarters at 10 a.m. the next day.

**CJ: What happened in the end?**

SG: That night I spoke to people on the phone who knew Cambodia very well. They advised me not to go to the police station the next day, but to leave. Everyone was afraid we would be blackmailed. That wasn't an option for me, but neither was a Cambodian prison. I had to shoot in the next few days. I had been working on this scene for five years. I had to have permission to shoot. This was the only solution. So at 11 o'clock, intentionally one hour late, I called the police station, asked for the police chief and told him that we would not be coming to the station because we were waiting for a permit from Phnom Penh. I heard him talking to someone in the background. Back on the phone, he told me he would come to my hotel in an hour's time. I knew then that I had won. He was coming to me, not me to him. He brought a beauti-

ful shooting permit, with stamps and signatures. Then we negotiated for over three hours. About the price, the "fee" for the permit. We came to an agreement and that same evening we were able to start shooting.

**CJ: You say you shot the whole film with an amateur camera. But you describe yourself as a "technology fetishist". How does that go together?**

SG: It doesn't go together, and I won't do it again. We had modified the camera. We tried to get a cinema gamma. We had expensive ancillary lenses and super sound equipment with radio mics, etc. But it was still a compromise and, as I said, I wouldn't want to do it again.

**CJ: Did you also operate the camera?**

SG: I'm a cameraman, sound man, director, writer and producer all in one. A film of this size couldn't be made any other way with the small budget I had available. It definitely wouldn't have been possible to shoot in Cambodia with a larger crew either.

**CJ: In your previous films you had cameramen?**

SG: Yes, quite famous ones [laughs], at least they are today. But money is only partly the reason why I do the camera work today. Even if I had a bigger budget for a film, I'd want to film myself.

The camera is the film. I am the camera. I am the film. I was never happy with my camera men. On a personal level I am. They were and still are wonderful people. They are also technically far superior to me. And above all, they have experience, which I unfortunately don't have. But – and here comes a very big "but" – only I know my film. I'm the one who has the sleepless nights. I persuade people to be in my film. People who never, ever wanted to be in a film. Policemen who would have loved to arrest me. And I do the camera work with the same obsession it takes to pull off such an undertaking. I break the rules all the time. For example, I say to my protagonists, "Look at the camera when you talk to me". Or when they walk out of the light, I don't put the camera down, I follow them, into a corner where there might not be any light. That looks terrible, and no cameraman wants to live with that.

**CJ: Nevertheless, I'm thrilled with your camera work! You're up close and personal, and action relevant to the story often happens in the background too.**

SG: Thank you for the compliment. As I mentioned somewhere else, I consider myself a cinematographer and photographer. I identify with my job 100%. However, the camera work would be even better if I didn't also have to watch out for things like unwanted wind noise, or give director's instructions. I try to create my own style. And that includes directing the background action you mentioned. In "real" films, that is, in the big expensive feature film productions, there are assistant directors, people who are responsible exclusively for background action. Although I can't always influence the background directly, by giving instructions, I try to see the background as more than just a backdrop. I do that primarily through the

choice of location and the camera position within the location. For example, I filmed the protagonist Jessica in front of a Hindu penis shrine, a religious site where there are hundreds of penis sculptures of all sizes. I knew Jessica would talk about her sex addiction. The sight of the erect phalluses literally sent her into ecstasy. She talked like a waterfall during the two-hour interview. When I initially inspected the site, I had already noticed that there was a canal behind the penis temple with a lot of boat traffic, and that the boats sometimes emitted high jets of water when they turned. That was my background for the Jessica scene.

**CJ: I can see that the locations were chosen with a lot of thought.**

SG: In a normal television production, of course, this approach would not be possible, there wouldn't be time. They also have different standards, of course. My aim was to tell a very complex story, and not just on a dialogue or interview level. I had to bring in the local culture. We spent a lot of time trying to achieve this. Almost every scene is staged like the penis temple scene. The scene with the American ex-soldier Dan, in the Cambodian shooting range, the scene with Dieter in the bodybuilding studio or the protagonist George in front of a sheet flying in the wind on which he has copied a chapter from Nabokov's novel *Lolita* with a felt pen. These are all very important images and, as you know, it took years to complete the film. This care, this meticulousness will not necessarily be consciously noticed by the average moviegoer. I realize that. Emotionally, though, it will add to the film as a whole and if I'm lucky, get my story across.

**CJ: You told me that you spent almost 2000 hours editing the film.**

SG: Yes, the editing room became my second home... I took even longer for the two previous films, even for the unreleased *Passion Despair*. I can't think about it, it makes me dizzy... For this film it was relatively quick because I now have an editor. Our film is created at the editing table. To return to our initial subject, most of the fiction is created here. This is where we create a new reality. I can't say that I really love this work. The whole business is terribly lonely and when I think of how many years of my life I have spent in these darkened rooms, I feel dizzy again. Over 60 hours of original footage was produced for this film.

**CJ: I was just about to ask how long the finished film will be...**

SG: Right now, it's 180 minutes long. It could be 240 minutes long. That's how much good, interesting, finished footage we have. Now that we soon have to think about the film's cinema release, of course, we have to consider a shorter version... 125 minutes? Anything shorter won't be possible.

**CJ: Two films?**

SG: You laugh, but we have thought of that. Like with Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac*, part 1 and part 2. One reason not to do this is that it could be interpreted as self-importance and this

would distract attention away from my real concern. I am not Lars von Trier [laughs]... even though I find his films enormously inspiring. He is also a "personal filmmaker"...

**CJ: A question about budget, costs and finances. Who paid for all this and what did the film cost?**

SG: Unfortunately, we have so far received no funding whatsoever. None of the usual bodies such as foundations, TV stations, etc. have helped either. The problem is that I make films without a script. I even would even go so far as to say that a concept, a publicly made one to be exact (we use tons of paper for our own purposes), would limit me. I "write" with the camera rolling. No one wants to take such a "risk", I say this in quotes. This film was pre-financed by myself and made thanks to the hard work of dozens of people. I now hope we can bring in more money with it. There was no initial budget. We had a new budget every year, so there are five budgets and also five statements. If I can find the time, I could one day figure out the total costs. Added to this are thousands of hours of unpaid work. I suppose the so-called "production value", according to Swiss industry standards, would be around 700,000 Swiss francs.

**CJ: The standard question: Do you have a new project?**

SG: Of course. In my work and everyday life, I am constantly encountering new issues, new white spaces on the map. The world is also becoming more and more politically correct. We have to do something about that!

**CJ: Can you divulge anything?**

SG: There are several projects, for example *Dark Stream*, which would also be set in Southeast Asia. Another story which I want to set in Italy is called *Night Shots*. But I'll probably do a project with the working title *River of Destiny* first, a "personal film"! This film is about coincidences, fateful connections, "self-fulfilling prophecies", "synchronicity" (a term by C.G. Jung). The film is set in Cameroon and Brazil.

**CJ: Thank you for the interview.**